

THE RURAL WOMEN'S REPORT



A RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION PROJECT ON
FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN
RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Department for Community Development
Government of Western Australia
Family and Domestic Violence Unit

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Executive Summary

The *Western Australian Family and Domestic Violence State Strategic Plan 2004–2008* raises issues relevant to women living in rural areas who experience family and domestic violence. The Plan cites the situation of women living on stations and in farming and mining towns, in particular, as requiring further research. To address this, the Family and Domestic Violence Unit (FDVU) undertook a research and consultation project to gain a better understanding of issues relating to family and domestic violence in a rural context.

The project brief was to:

- Identify key stakeholders operating in the area of family and domestic violence in rural and regional areas.
- Consult with workers and stakeholders in the field to gain a greater understanding of issues relating to family and domestic violence responses in regional and rural Western Australia, particularly country, farming and mining towns.
- Prepare a discussion paper to inform the further development of policies and practices addressing family and domestic violence, based on the research and feedback obtained through consultation with stakeholders.

In examining responses to family and domestic violence in non-metropolitan settings, this project did not seek information on remote areas, as these regions have specific and important issues that require dedicated attention. The isolation some remote communities experience and the large Indigenous population in these areas raise particular issues for policy development and service provision. For the purposes of this paper, the selection of areas, organisations and interview candidates was guided by the following terms of reference: “non-metropolitan areas but not isolated Aboriginal outstations”.

Consultation was undertaken with professionals and stakeholders from a range of government and non-government agencies in regional and rural Western Australia, including:

- Department for Community Development;
- Western Australia Police Service;
- South West Aboriginal Medical Service;
- Anglicare;
- Country Women’s Association;
- Regional Domestic Violence Committees; and
- refuges.

The Rural, Remote and Regional Women’s Network also distributed a version of the questionnaire used in stakeholder interviews to its members via its email lists. As a result, several responses were received from women living in small towns and on stations.

Issues for Consideration

From the literature review and through analysis of the stakeholder consultations, common themes or issues were identified for further consideration.

Community Attitudes

Stakeholder feedback and research literature suggested that certain aspects of rural culture present barriers to both women escaping domestic violence and men seeking help for their abusive behaviour. In particular, conservative community attitudes that resist the acknowledgement of family and domestic violence can inhibit the ability of victims and perpetrators to recognise abusive behaviour and to seek help. Stakeholders emphasised the need to confront and change these community attitudes.

Community Awareness

Several stakeholders expressed concern at the lack of resources to use in the promotion of community awareness, such as brochures and posters, and the lack of co-ordination in their production and dissemination.

Issues affecting the use of printed material for community awareness included currency of content and the reluctance of people in small communities to pick up clearly displayed brochures for fear of being seen doing so. Options suggested by stakeholders to increase community awareness included:

- regularly renewing posters;
- co-ordinating awareness-raising activities with significant national and international events;
- distributing printed material in locations where it can be collected anonymously;
- the use of local radio; and
- promoting positive messages about women's and men's roles in the community and the family.

Healthy Relationships Training

Healthy relationships training for young people was nominated as important by several stakeholders. School-based programs could play a central role in the prevention of domestic and family violence due to the connection between students' behaviour towards staff and other students and family and domestic violence. In a rural setting, healthy relationships training could form one part of a broader community education program to address attitudes that deny the existence or seriousness of family and domestic violence.

Legislation

In December 2004, the *Acts Amendments (Family and Domestic Violence) Act 2004* came into effect, affording greater protection to victims of family and domestic violence. Reaction to the amendments, particularly the Police Order provisions, was mixed. There was general support for the amendments, but some stakeholders expressed concern regarding the possible effects of the Police Orders in terms of displacing men from their homes without access to alternative

accommodation and in terms of contributing to the reluctance of victims to contact the police and thereby involve their partners in the criminal justice system.

The Judicial System

A common view expressed by interview participants was that 'the system' had the potential to re-victimise family and domestic violence victims, particularly through the ability of perpetrators to use legal processes to intimidate and harass their victims. There was concern about the ability of victims to access Legal Aid, particularly in regional areas where legal resources are limited, and about the potential for Interim Residence Orders to be granted to abusive partners. Other areas of concern include insufficient consideration by courts of assault in a domestic context and the exposure of children to violence. The sentencing of perpetrators was also raised as an issue.

Funding

Participants in the consultation nominated a 'lack of funding' as the most significant factor affecting the capacity of service providers to assist people seeking help for family and domestic violence situations. Stakeholders commented that population-based funding was insufficient for their needs due to the higher cost of operating services in regional and rural areas. The size of the district to be serviced, the consequent higher costs of travel time and fuel, and the greater incidence of domestic violence in non-metropolitan areas are factors that increase costs for rural service providers.

Distance

Stakeholders spoke strongly about the implications of distance, isolation and a lack of transport on the ability of their clients to access services. Options to overcome the issue of distance include police officers directing victims to help-lines and other services for the provision of over-the-telephone counselling and support, and the introduction of a mobile model of service provision where victims are visited in their homes.

Waiting Times

The consultations revealed significant stakeholder frustration regarding the waiting times for, and infrequency of, services in non-crisis situations. Delays were seen to discourage clients from accessing services, and it was considered that more flexibility in service delivery was required, particularly in terms of allowing clients to access services in adjacent districts.

Co-ordinated Services

The ability to provide co-ordinated, comprehensive support was emphasised as particularly important in the 72 hours following crisis situations. In that period, victims' motivation to take action to address the abusive nature of their relationship is high. Among the stakeholders interviewed, a good working relationship was identified between many of the refuges and the police. However, there is scope to expand the current arrangements. The Regional Domestic Violence Committees

(RDVCs) have a significant role to play in this area, but they require the consistent involvement of key stakeholders.

Anonymity

Lack of anonymity was cited as a significant factor inhibiting people from accessing information and assistance for family and domestic violence situations. In small rural communities, accessing domestic violence support services carries the risk of social repercussions once 'word gets around', and physical repercussions if a perpetrator learns that a victim has sought help.

Outreach and Follow-Up Support

Outreach work is a significant element in responses to abuse. Service providers indicated that they felt unable to provide the level of outreach support required. A common belief held by victims is that they cannot seek help if they are unwilling to leave the relationship or if they decide to return to the perpetrator. Information needs to be provided to rectify these misunderstandings and stress the availability of services to all victims seeking assistance.

Men's Services

Stakeholders expressed concern that there is a lack of counselling and accommodation services to assist men who perpetrate domestic violence.

Children's Services

The protection of children from the effects of family and domestic violence has been strengthened by the *Act Amendments (Domestic Violence) Act 2004*. Restraining Orders can now be granted to protect children who are at risk of being exposed to violence. Some stakeholders indicated that children's requirements for counselling have not been fully addressed in current service provision.

Housing

Concerns were raised that victims of family and domestic violence in rural areas may return to a violent partner because there are few alternative accommodation options available. A lack of appropriate housing and over-crowding were cited as factors in incidents of family and domestic violence within the Aboriginal community. A greater awareness of the consideration that Homeswest gives to victims of domestic violence with respect to debt and property damage is required.

Conclusion

Many issues affecting victims and perpetrators of family and domestic violence are exacerbated for people residing in regional and rural areas. In considering future responses to family and domestic violence, it is important to address the particular factors that impact on service provision in country Western Australia. Positive outcomes can be achieved for country-based victims of abuse where relevant and timely assistance is available. For this to occur, funding must be sufficient to sustain effective services appropriate to the target population.

Background

People say, “Oh, nothing happens in the country”.¹

The *Western Australian Family and Domestic Violence State Strategic Plan 2004-2008* provides a single overarching policy framework to guide government departments in their policy development and implementation processes in order to achieve a more co-ordinated response to family and domestic violence. The Plan aims to “reduce and ultimately prevent the incidence of family and domestic violence in Western Australia”.²

In its discussion of women at particular risk of violence, the issues faced by women living in rural and remote areas — particularly on stations and in farming and mining towns — were raised as an area requiring further attention. A range of studies in this field indicate that an isolating matrix of social, economic and geographic factors can result in women residing in these areas experiencing increased vulnerability and a decreased ability to seek help.

Compounding the difficulties of accessing assistance, the rates of violence are higher in country areas. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, rates of reported domestic violence in rural and regional areas were higher than in the Perth metropolitan area. For Indigenous people, the regional/rural rate was 2.8 times the rate of domestic violence reported in Perth. For non-Indigenous people, the regional/rural rate was 1.5 times the Perth rate. Irrespective of region, the Indigenous rate of domestic violence far exceeds the non-Indigenous rate. In regional/rural areas, Indigenous people were 33 times more likely to be victims of domestic violence than were non-Indigenous people, while in Perth they were 17.4 times more likely to be victims than were non-Indigenous people.³

To address these issues, the Family and Domestic Violence Unit (FDVU) undertook a research and consultation project to gain a better understanding of issues relating to family and domestic violence in a rural context.

The project brief was to:

- Identify key stakeholders operating in the area of family and domestic violence in rural and regional areas.
- Consult with workers and stakeholders in the field to gain a greater understanding of the issues affecting family and domestic violence responses in regional and rural Western Australia, particularly country, farming and mining towns.

¹ Consultation comment.

² Family and Domestic Violence Unit, *Western Australian Family and Domestic Violence State Strategic Plan 2004–2008*, Department for Community Development, p. 1.

³ Loh, N & Ferrante, A (2003), *Aboriginal Involvement in the Western Australian Criminal Justice System: A Statistical Review, 2001*, Crime Research Centre University of Western Australia, p. iii (see Figure 1.1).

- Prepare a discussion paper to inform the further development of policies and practices addressing family and domestic violence, based on the research and feedback obtained through consultation with stakeholders.

What is family and domestic violence?

Defining family and domestic violence can be difficult. However, a consistent and predominant premise accepted by all sources is that family and domestic violence is gender-based, and this must be acknowledged and understood. This premise is supported by statistics that indicate that women are victims of family and domestic violence at far greater rates than are men.⁴

The term ‘family violence’ recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities’ kinship structures and cultural understandings. That is, the use of the term recognises that abuse may be perpetrated and experienced by a range of relatives within the family group.

The definition that informs this project is drawn from the State Strategic Plan:

*Domestic violence is considered to be behaviour which results in physical, sexual and/or psychological damage, forced social isolation, economic deprivation or behaviour which causes the victim to live in fear.*⁵

Further, the *Acts Amendment (Family and Domestic Violence) Act 2004* defines “act of domestic violence” to specifically include:

- assault, personal injury, kidnapping and deprivation of liberty;
- property damage (including harming pets) and ongoing intimidating or offensive behaviour;
- threats of violence or property damage;
- stalking; and
- ongoing emotional abuse.

For the purposes of this report, this definition applies to violence between adult intimate partners and family members. It does not apply to violence directed at children, although issues relating to the effects of children witnessing violence are included within the scope of this paper.

The guiding principles articulated in the State Strategic Plan also inform this analysis. The principles include:

- *All forms of family and domestic violence are unacceptable in any group, regardless of background, culture, religion, gender, age, marital status or sexuality.*
- *Family and domestic violence is an issue that affects the whole community and demands a whole-of-community response.*

⁴ Family and Domestic Violence Unit, *Western Australian Family and Domestic Violence State Strategic Plan 2004–2008*, p. 5.

⁵ Family and Domestic Violence Unit, *Western Australian Family and Domestic Violence State Strategic Plan 2004–2008*, p. 5.

- *The State Government has a responsibility to show leadership in preventing violence against women and children and to ensure co-ordinated planning, monitoring and evaluation across all areas of government.*
- *The safety and wellbeing of those experiencing family and domestic violence must be the first priority for any response.*
- *Enhancing a non-offending parent/carer's safety enhances the child's safety.*
- *The causes of family and domestic violence are complex and demand a range of responses.*
- *Responses must reflect the cultural and diverse needs of individuals and communities.*
- *Perpetrators of family and domestic violence must be held responsible for their behaviour and acts that constitute a criminal offence must be dealt with accordingly.*

What is rural?

In examining responses to family and domestic violence in non-metropolitan settings, this project did not seek information on remote areas, as these regions have specific and important issues that require dedicated attention. The isolation experienced by some remote communities and the large Indigenous population in these areas raise particular issues for policy development and service delivery.

In order to include the farming and mining towns and stations identified in the State Strategic Plan, "rural" versus "remote" areas were not strictly defined. For the purposes of this paper, the selection of areas, organisations and interview candidates was guided by the following terms of reference: "non-metropolitan areas but not isolated Aboriginal outstations". In addition, regional cities like Mandurah, Bunbury and Albany were included because, although they have many of the features of a city and can be statistically defined as such, they act as a service centre for outlying areas.

Methodology

To gain a sound understanding of the nature of domestic violence, such as the gendered nature of the violence and the power and control issues within abusive relationships, research into the existing literature on the subject was undertaken. Sources consulted included resources within the FDVU's library and internet-based literature searches. The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse website was a source of current research that approaches the study of family and domestic violence from a range of philosophical standpoints, as well as examining issues around the perpetration and prevention of violence. The Federal *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* literature was a particularly valuable source of information.

In addition, the District Plans submitted by each of the rural Department for Community Development districts were used to focus the research. District Plans provide a demographic description of the area and outline current issues, past achievements and funding priorities for the coming year. The plans assisted in the

identification of those towns and regions where family and domestic violence had been highlighted as a priority issue by the local departmental office.

Consultation

The review of relevant literature was crucial to the process of establishing the issues that have previously been reported as relevant when considering family and domestic violence in rural areas. However, to gain a greater understanding of issues affecting responses to family and domestic violence in regional and rural Western Australia, consultation with professionals and stakeholders in the field was undertaken. The consultation provided an opportunity to gauge which of the known issues were of greatest concern.

The findings of the research were used to draft a set of questions, which were asked in semi-structured interviews. The questions were constructed as both open and closed questions and included notes on common issues for the interviewer to use as prompts in the discussion, if required (see Appendix One).

The consultation also aimed to create a contact list for future policy development work by collating the contact details of those interviewed and other stakeholders. In the first instance, stakeholders already known to the FDVU were approached to participate. These included the co-ordinators of the Regional Domestic Violence Committees, the Child Protection and Local Women's Family Violence Sergeants within the Western Australia Police Service ("the police") and staff at local women's refuges. At the conclusion of their interviews, these contacts were asked to recommend other professionals in the area.

Consultation was undertaken with representatives from a range of government and non-government agencies, including:

- Department for Community Development;
- Western Australia Police Service;
- South West Aboriginal Medical Service;
- Anglicare;
- Country Women's Association;
- Regional Domestic Violence Committees; and
- refuges (see Appendix Two).

The Rural, Remote and Regional Women's Network also distributed a version of the questionnaire to members via its email lists. As a result, several responses were received from women living in small towns and on stations.

The interview and email responses were analysed for common themes through an iterative process of comparison. As themes emerged, they were incorporated into interview questions, so that direct questions on specific issues raised in the early interviews were asked in some of the later interviews.

Analysis of the Findings

The *Family and Domestic Violence State Strategic Plan* identifies three priority areas: prevention, protection and provision. These priority areas provided a framework for analysing and ordering the common themes from the consultation feedback. The Plan includes definitions for the priority areas:

Prevention	Protection	Provision
Ensure the prevention of interpersonal and gender-based violence through community education that is supported by an effective legal framework.	Promote the protection of those at risk of experiencing family and domestic violence through beneficial changes to the law, policy and practice, and hold perpetrators accountable for their abusive behaviour.	Develop the provision of an effective service response that meets the needs of all those experiencing family and domestic violence.

Prevention

Community Attitudes

The need to increase awareness of, and address unhelpful community attitudes towards, family and domestic violence was a strong theme that arose from several stakeholder interviews. Interview participants frequently cited community attitudes, such as “domestic violence doesn’t happen here” or “It’s private family business”, as contributing to the continuation of violence by inhibiting the ability of victims and perpetrators of abuse to seek help. Further, many family and domestic violence professionals expressed concern that some victims and perpetrators did not recognise abusive behaviour.

Research has suggested that aspects of rural culture present barriers to both women escaping domestic violence and men seeking help for their abusive behaviour. In the consultations, stakeholders agreed that the attitudes of communities towards various behaviours constituted a major difference between country and city areas. Social and cultural habits and values in rural areas can be more conservative, and some participants commented to the effect that: “There is a far narrower range of [acceptable] behaviours in the country. People are expected to behave in a particular way.”⁶ In elaboration of this point, a stakeholder described the social environment in which they lived:

*There are guys who’ve stolen the 1970s persona; the King of the Hill, you do as I say attitude. They’re bound up with old ideas: be tough, big boys don’t cry, think you’re a pansy if you try to manage anger ... In a big city there’s more available, more different kinds of guys and a less macho culture, a different culture.*⁷

⁶ Consultation comment.

⁷ Consultation comment.

In the context of investigating issues affecting people experiencing or perpetrating family and domestic violence in rural areas, community attitudes are pertinent because they influence both the environment in which abuse occurs and the willingness of people to seek help, as well as the kind of help appropriate to the particular situation. Where a community's social values conflict with the acceptance of the existence of family and domestic violence or the acknowledgement of such violence as a crime based on power and control in a relationship, it is less likely that people will recognise an abusive situation or seek assistance to end it.

The impact of rural attitudes on the likelihood to seek help or leave an abusive relationship is outlined by Wendt and Cheers in their article "Impacts of Rural Culture on Domestic Violence". In their study of how rural culture affects women's experiences of family and domestic violence, for which they interviewed current and past victims from a rural area, Wendt and Cheers conclude:

The values, beliefs and attitudes of the community influenced the women to remain in their situations longer than they might have in a different cultural context. The majority [of women interviewed] commented that they had wanted to leave their relationships but had decided to persevere because of their awareness of their community's culture and the pressures and expectations that it produced ... Their community's values and beliefs about marriage and preserving the family, family heritage and inheritance, religion and "public image", and the women's own personal support for these, had major impacts on their decisions and actions.⁸

It has long been accepted that reporting rates of family and domestic violence are far lower than its actual incidence. Given this, it is important that community education raises awareness of family and domestic violence and promotes an understanding of such abuse as unacceptable. As one stakeholder put it: "What we're doing is really good, but it's not hitting the crux of the problem. We need to change community attitudes".⁹

Community Awareness

As part of the consultations, interviewees discussed a range of community education tools and methods used to raise awareness of family and domestic violence. Several stakeholders expressed their frustration at a lack of resources for promoting community awareness, such as brochures and posters, and the lack of co-ordination in their production and dissemination. Brochures and, particularly, posters can be effective, but only when they are distributed in relevant locations, designed for the target audience and replaced regularly to ensure that the content is current.

Stakeholders expressed a preference for the FDVU to co-ordinate the production of community education publications. They felt that it would be more efficient for the FDVU to do this in consultation with the regional committees, rather than each regional committee undertaking its own individual publicity or poster campaigns. It would also provide a consistent message across the State. One suggestion aimed at avoiding the use of out-of-date content in published resources was to renew posters and brochures on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence

⁸ Wendt, S and Cheers, B (2002), 'Impacts of Rural Culture on Domestic Violence', *Rural Social Work*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, June, p. 7.

⁹ Consultation comment.

Against Women (White Ribbon Day) or the National Stop Violence Against Women Day. The release of new material at these times has the potential to garner additional media attention, which would contribute to greater community awareness.

One issue identified by interviewees as affecting the use of printed material for the promotion of community awareness included businesses and organisations being unwilling to display the material. It was also considered that people in small communities experienced a greater reluctance to pick up clearly displayed brochures for fear of being seen doing so. As such, alternative options are required to increase the effectiveness of community education campaigns in rural areas.

One option proposed to enable people to collect printed family and domestic violence information more anonymously was to have it available at locations that many people use. Some stakeholders described how, at community events such as festivals or playgroups, they have family and domestic violence information available, and the printed material is taken without people needing to reveal themselves by requesting it. Integrating family and domestic violence information provision into socially acceptable community events is one way to enable people to seek assistance while remaining anonymous.

Another suggestion was the use of local radio. In small communities, there are often only one or two radio stations, and they are a central conduit for information. Messages broadcast on these channels are thus able to reach a target audience efficiently. The other advantage of using radio is that it reaches people experiencing family and domestic violence in their homes; they do not have to seek the information out, which is important for the reasons discussed above.

Radio could also be a culturally appropriate format for Indigenous communities, as “it is a very effective communications medium in communities with a strong oral tradition”.¹⁰ The success of characters like Mary G indicates the important role radio can play in Aboriginal community education. Mary G is a fictional Aboriginal “auntie” who hosts a popular chat show on Broome’s Goolarri Radio. Discussing a range of topics, interviewing politicians and local officials and taking calls from listeners, Mary G raises important issues about wellbeing for Aboriginal people in a humorous and engaging way.

Rates of family and domestic violence are higher among Indigenous people than among non-Indigenous people, and higher again among Indigenous people based in rural and regional areas. Several stakeholders noted with concern that violence within the Indigenous community had become ‘normalised’.¹¹ Mary G’s style of using humour and working from a strong cultural understanding could have merit in the dissemination of important family and domestic violence information to people in the Aboriginal community.

In the discussions about community education, the need to promote positive messages emerged as a theme. Stakeholders identified messages valuing women’s roles as mothers and carers as important to increasing general levels of

¹⁰ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1999), *Digital Dreaming: A national review of Indigenous media and communications*, ATSIC.

http://www.atsic.gov.au/Programs/broadcasting/digital_dreaming/default.asp.

¹¹ Consultation comment.

respect for women in the community. One stakeholder suggested taking advantage of Mothers' Day and holding events or public awareness campaigns on this day. In addition, research articles such as Wendt and Cheers's paper, cited above, highlight the role of women as partners on the land and in the farming sector. Community education strategies that emphasise and promote valuing women's roles in the community could assist in changing community attitudes that are disrespectful of women and which contribute to an environment that tacitly supports domestic violence.

The need to value men's roles as fathers and promote positive relationships with their partners and children through non-violence was also noted. The importance placed on fatherhood by many men who commit family and domestic violence is highlighted in the evaluations of the *Freedom From Fear* campaign:

The waves of campaign evaluation research with men indicate that the original advertisements, focussing on the message that family and domestic violence had a large impact on children, generated a strong response from men and encouraged many to seek help.¹²

The report goes on to comment that the response from men was not as significant following the broadcast of advertisements designed to promote the message that the perpetrator is responsible for the violence. This is an important message to continue to promote. Men's positive response to increased awareness of the effects of children of witnessing violence provides scope to underpin an effective education campaign that includes the issue of who bears responsibility for violence.

Healthy Relationship Training

One element in the effort to prevent family and domestic violence is the education of young people on unacceptable behaviours from and towards a partner. Healthy relationship training for young people at the time they begin to form intimate relationships was nominated as important by several stakeholders as a preventative measure. It is also important because statistics indicate that the incidence of violence decreases with age and younger women are more at risk.

The *Australia Says No* web site, television advertisements and publicity campaign aimed to provide information to young people, their friends and parents about family and domestic violence and assist them to seek help for abusive relationships. Importantly, the web site outlines the continuum of controlling behaviour, highlighting that abusive relationships are not only physically violent but can also include possessiveness, jealousy, put-downs, sulking and manipulation.

Such campaigns are important, but school-based programs also play a central role due to the connection between students' behaviour in class, towards staff and other students, and family and domestic violence. A study conducted by the Office for the Status of Women made the following findings:

¹² Family and Domestic Violence Unit (2003), *Key Findings from the 2003 Women's Awareness and Attitudes Survey Post Campaign Evaluation Five (Men's Survey)*, Department for Community Development, p. 5.

- The capacity of schools to socialise students into non-violent patterns of relationship is limited unless they work productively with the students' families and professionals working in the domestic violence and associated fields.
- School bullying and domestic violence are often interrelated, requiring schools to adopt strategies to address the needs of individual students.
- Pastoral care arrangements within schools that provide continuity in the student–teacher relationship are more successful in assisting students who are exposed to domestic violence.
- Whole-of-school approaches, such as the Health Promoting Schools framework, have a greater impact on domestic violence than unco-ordinated single initiatives.
- Tackling domestic violence and its associated behaviours in schools should occur across the curriculum. The issues and the skills and behaviours students need can be addressed in all curriculum areas.¹³

A schools pilot project is currently underway as a partnership between the FDVU and the Department of Education to fund initiatives aimed at raising children's and young people's awareness of violence in the home and equipping them with coping strategies. A strong theme arising from discussions with teachers is that this project will contribute to making the school a safe place for children. The FDVU has produced a range of resources for young people aged 13–25, which are focussed on young people who experience violence at home, helping mates support each other and dating violence.

There have been reports that some teachers express reluctance about becoming involved in this area. Time constraints, current workloads and not being professional counsellors or social workers are reasons that have been given for unwillingness to involve educators in family and domestic violence initiatives. However, as they have regular and ongoing contact with their students, teachers can play a significant role in supporting children and young people who are experiencing violence in the home. It is essential that relevant training for teachers is available and that good links with local services are established, so that teachers know where to go to seek further assistance.

Early education about healthy relationships has a central role to play in reducing the incidence of violence within relationships and in raising young people's awareness of the assistance available. In a rural setting, healthy relationships training could form one part of a broader community education program addressing attitudes that deny the existence or seriousness of family and domestic violence.

¹³ Office of the Status of Women and ACT Department for Education and Community Services (2001), *No Violence in Schools: Building Healthy Relationships for Young People Project*, Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, p. iv.

Protection

Legislation

In the past decade, several reviews have been conducted into Western Australia's domestic violence laws. In December 2004, the *Acts Amendments (Family and Domestic Violence) Act 2004* came into effect, amending the *Restraining Orders Act 1997*, the *Criminal Code* and the *Bail Act 1892* to afford greater protection to victims of family and domestic violence. The amendments arose from the findings of the 2002–03 review of the *Restraining Orders Act*. They enact substantial changes to powers of protection, definitions of violence and who could be covered by a protection order. The major changes included the following:

- The consent defence was removed. This is in line with all other States. The amendment was made in response to feedback from police and other stakeholders that the consent defence undermined the effectiveness of Restraining Orders (ROs) and made the enforcement of breaches problematic.
- New defences were included to cover situations where a person was using a primary dispute resolution method or acting through a lawyer, acting in an emergency, or acting in accordance with action taken by the Department for Community Development under the child welfare laws.
- The definition of 'domestic relationship' was expanded to include partners, ex-partners, children, step-children and, potentially, other family members and carers.
- The grounds for invoking a Violence Restraining Order (VRO) were expanded by broadening the definition of "act of abuse" to include damage to property and behaviour that is intimidating, offensive or emotionally abusive.
- Police were granted the power to issue on-the-spot, 24-hour Police Orders without the victim's consent in situations where they reasonably believe an incident of violence has occurred or will occur. Police also have the power to issue a 72-hour Police Order on the same grounds with the victim's consent.
- Police are now obliged to investigate where there is reasonable suspicion that a person is committing an act of domestic violence and either take action or prepare a report explaining why no action was taken.
- To obtain a Restraining Order to protect a child, it is sufficient to show that the child has been exposed to an act of family and domestic violence and that it is likely, or there is a reasonable fear, that the child will be exposed to violence again.
- Where a child is exposed to family and domestic violence, this can be taken as an aggravating circumstance for sentencing.

In the consultation feedback, reaction to the amendments, particularly the Police Order provisions, was mixed. Although there was strong support for the

amendments, a significant minority of stakeholders expressed concern about the possible effects of Police Orders.

Stakeholders cited favourable aspects of the new legislation as being the expanded definition of a domestic relationship, the inclusion of damage to property as grounds for an Order, and the improved ability to protect victims and children of family and domestic violence through the use of Police Orders. Police Orders were seen as sending a strong message to the community that family and domestic violence is a crime and will be treated as such.

Concerns expressed by stakeholders pertained mostly to the implications of issuing of an Order. Prior to the legislation, it was only possible to obtain a Restraining Order outside court hours by telephone, an option very rarely used by police. As such, it was often necessary to remove the victim and their children to a safe location other than the victim's residence. Police Orders now enable police officers to exclude the perpetrator from the residence. Several stakeholders were concerned about where perpetrators would go during the period of the Police Order. A network of refuges is funded to provide safe accommodation for women and children escaping violence; there are few very similar services for men to access immediately after a Police Order is issued against them.

Another issue raised was the possibility that victims could have a false sense of security once an Order is issued. This is particularly relevant in rural areas because houses can be isolated from neighbours and police response times can be affected by distance. Stakeholders were keen to note that, while they are an important aspect of the response to family and domestic violence, Police or Restraining Orders should not be seen as all that needs to be done to protect victims and hold offenders accountable.

Some concerns were raised that victims may not call the police to report of violence in case the police issued an Order against the perpetrator due to fear of repercussions. Stakeholder comments on this topic were inconclusive. Some stakeholders were very concerned that family and domestic violence would go "underground" and be reported even less often; others stated that, contrary to their earlier fears, this had not happened in their area. Some participants noted that this may be the case for Aboriginal women in particular, as there is a historical reluctance to approach police and see the partner become involved in the criminal justice system. At present there is no evidence available to evaluate these concerns.

The implementation of the legislation has also had a significant effect on the Department for Community Development. The Department is receiving a higher number of notifications as a result of the police's operating procedures following multiple call-outs to one address. In the District Plans submitted by the departmental district offices, this is noted as an issue by staff, with some districts queuing case work.

A review of the *Acts Amendment (Family and Domestic Violence) Act 2004*, particularly the sections relating to Police Orders and their implementation, is expected within the next two years. The findings of the review should relate to the level to which victims' and children's safety has been increased, to what extent perpetrators are held accountable, and the impacts on supporting agencies.

The Judicial System

A common view expressed by interview participants was that ‘the system’ had the potential to re-victimise family and domestic violence victims, particularly through the ability of perpetrators to use legal processes to continue to intimidate and harass victims. Other stakeholder concerns related to confusing and daunting court processes.

Interim Residency Orders and Legal Aid

In particular, stakeholders were concerned about the child custody process, whereby an ex-parte hearing may result in an Interim Residence Order being granted to a parent who abuses their partner. An ex-parte hearing is where only one party to the application is present and the other party does not have the opportunity to put their case. In such situations, an Interim Residence Order may be issued without the applicant’s history of family and domestic violence being taken into account and without consideration of the fact that it is most often the victim who is the primary care-giver. Domestic violence workers reported that where interim residence is granted to the perpetrator, it causes the victim additional stress and anxiety, as it can be a matter of months before a final custody order is granted.

The issue of access to Legal Aid was also raised. Stakeholders noted with concern that where a perpetrator has lodged their application to receive Legal Aid to defend assault charges or a Restraining Order application, the victim is ineligible for such assistance because it is deemed a conflict of interest for Legal Aid.

Advice received from the Domestic Violence Legal Unit (DVLU) within Legal Aid clarifies some of these concerns. The DVLU stated that the application form seeking an Interim Residence Order does ask the applicant to declare any past or current Restraining Orders, although the point was conceded that some applicants may lie and perjure themselves. On the issue of ex-parte hearings granting Interim Residence Orders to perpetrators of domestic violence, the DVLU stressed that ex-parte hearings are the exception and are granted only in emergencies or where the applicant can provide a strong justification. Further, in such situations, the court will schedule a second hearing to allow the other applicant to put their side within days. Contrary to concerns raised by some stakeholders, Interim Residence Orders can be varied at times before the final order is decided; an Interim Residence Order granting residence of the children to a perpetrator is not “set in stone” until the final order is issued, which can occur several months later.

On the availability of Legal Aid, the DVLU noted that conflict of interest is an issue, but it is not necessarily the case that where one party to a domestic violence–related case is being assisted by Legal Aid, the other is ineligible. For one-off legal advice and assistance, with no ongoing advocacy or representation, it is quite possible to assist both parties. If different Legal Aid offices are approached, it is likely the officers involved are unaware that another office is assisting the other partner. For cases involving ongoing representation where both parties meet means and case merit tests, one party may be provided with Legal Aid directly by staff and the other given a grant of aid to access a private solicitor. Indeed, applicants for VROs are more likely to receive assistance than respondents, due to

the necessary case-funding prioritisation process undertaken by Legal Aid, which favours applicants over respondents in such situations.

For people experiencing family and domestic violence in rural areas, accessing legal assistance can be more difficult because of the lower level of services available, the distances necessary to travel to access them and the timing of judges' visits on their country circuits. In some towns, Legal Aid or the Aboriginal Legal Service may be the only legal service available. In such cases, conflict of interest is an issue, and providing alternative options for legal support can be more difficult. Some officers commented on past practice in these situations, citing instances where one party would be given access to a Legal Aid officer in another area via telephone. This is one solution in cases where clients are of equal merit and need.

The issues of family law and the administration of interim and final Residency Orders are very complex issues. It would be an appropriate strategy for the FDVU to continue to undertake research and provide information and advice on the effects of family law and Legal Aid processes on people experiencing family and domestic violence.

It is of concern that widely held beliefs about the justice system are not always accurate. The consultation feedback indicates that there is scope to improve the understanding of family law court and Legal Aid processes among domestic violence protection and advocacy workers. In combination with strategies to raise awareness within the legal profession about domestic violence, this may alleviate some concerns stakeholders hold about the impacts of court and child Residence Order processes.

Sentencing of Perpetrators

The sentencing of perpetrators was also raised as an issue. Stakeholders expressed their frustration at what they saw as an undermining of their protection and advocacy efforts by the judicial process. Stakeholders reported that victims are discouraged from coming forward and pursuing penalties for abuse through the criminal justice system because, in some cases, due weight is not given to assault charges in a domestic context. Although the recent legislative changes provide that a child being exposed to violence may be considered an aggravating factor in sentencing, there are mixed reports regarding the extent to which this provision is applied. Review of the impact of the legislation by considering some relevant cases, is required to examine this issue in further detail.

Research has highlighted the extent to which domestic violence is under-reported. Victims can be further discouraged from reporting incidents of violence, which carries the risk of increasing the likelihood of physical harm and causing family tensions, if the sentence is not perceived to be "worth it":

The court system doesn't support a whole-of-government approach. They're not working with government ... Many victims come to me and say, "It's just not worth it". We had a queue of victims out the door in December, January and February, but after three months of rebuffs and failings and no real punishment, the people got disheartened. Victims just don't seem to get anywhere.¹⁴

¹⁴ Consultation comment.

The FDVU is currently developing strategies to provide further information to magistrates and workers within the justice system about the nature of domestic violence. In developing effective strategies to increase awareness within the legal profession, partnerships with organisations such as The Law Society or student groups like Blackstone Law Students' Society could be considered.

Protecting victims from abuse and prosecuting abusers is a central element of the response to family and domestic violence. The feedback indicates that there are concerns and misconceptions about the current processes aimed at meeting these goals. It is important that all participants in the response to family and domestic violence understand and appreciate both the complexities of the issue and the dynamics of abusive relationships, as well as the justice system responses. As such, improving the availability of accurate and relevant information to officers across the family and domestic violence field is important.

Provision

*There are strengths about being in a small town. Staff are very dedicated, they do extra hours, have passion for their job and you know your colleagues and work together.*¹⁵

It is clear that an extensive network of support, accommodation, counselling and community development services exist throughout rural and regional Western Australia, and many professionals and community members work extremely hard to address family and domestic violence. During interviews, the words 'passion', 'dedication' and 'commitment' were frequently used to describe the work of refuge and agency officers.

The service providers' comments are supported by the findings of research into client satisfaction with the Carnarvon refuge conducted by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. This report aimed to evaluate the delivery of domestic violence services in that region through interviews with refuge clients. On being asked about staff attitudes and rapport with clients, women at the refuge said:

- "Staff related personal stories that were encouraging and a relief to me. I like it because there are different staff, different ideas and backgrounds."
- "I can talk to them and they understand my feelings."
- "They are there for me. They comfort me and help me deal with my fear."
- "I feel more protected. The staff treat the children in a loving and caring way."¹⁶

This commitment to assisting women, men and children affected by family and domestic violence was apparent in the consultation interviews. Agency and refuge officers spoke passionately and clearly about their needs and the needs of their clients, the strengths and weaknesses of living and working in small communities, and ways of moving forward to continually improve responses to family and domestic violence in a rural context.

Based on the experiences and concern expressed by stakeholders, and with great attention to the needs of country-based people experiencing family and domestic violence, the following issues were raised as important to the continued provision of quality family and domestic violence services in rural and regional areas.

Funding

"It's the dollars versus the distance"¹⁷

The most commonly cited factor that impairs the ability of service providers to deliver "an effective service response that meets the needs of all those experiencing family and domestic violence" is a lack of funding. Across the board, participants in the consultation — representing a range of public sector agencies, non-government service providers, advocates and individuals — nominated this

¹⁵ Consultation comment.

¹⁶ Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (2003), *The Best Practice for Early Intervention and Prevention of Domestic Violence in the Gascoyne Region*, p.21.

¹⁷ Consultation comment.

issue as reducing their ability to assist people seeking help for family and domestic violence situations.

A lack of funding has implications for the wellbeing of victims, perpetrators, children and staff working in this field, as it impacts on the hours of service availability, the frequency of service, the number of clients seen, the variety of services available and the geographic area covered.

A common theme expressed by participants was that funding levels are perceived to be inadequate for country-based services, relative to the extent of demand and the increased costs of operating outside the metropolitan area. While participants acknowledged that funding levels should match the lower population levels, many felt that the calculation of funding did not reflect the costs of operating across very large districts or the higher incidence of domestic violence outside the metropolitan area. There was concern about small numbers of staff available to cover large areas and the subsequent limits on the time that could be devoted to clients in small towns or communities outside regional centres, as well as the cost implications in terms of travel time and fuel. As such, a tension exists between what is contractually required and the service provider's ability to meet that level of service. As one stakeholder put it, "demand exceeds supply".¹⁸

Some stakeholders proposed the development of a benchmark for minimum funding levels and a model of staffing for services. Other stakeholders were wary of this possibility unless it was tailored to country and remote services and the nature of the services delivered, and not allocated on a 'per head of population' basis. While there is a tension between the capacity of funded services and the levels of demand experienced by providers, the question of optimum or preferred funding levels is unresolved. In part, this reflects the differences in how the range of stakeholders would use additional money. For some, it would reduce waiting times (see below) and expand the services currently available. For other, smaller operators, additional funds are necessary to continue to function.

In considering funding levels for family and domestic violence responses in rural and regional areas, it is crucial that the factors affecting service delivery are addressed and that any future policy development is relevant to the target population.

Access and Availability

*The DVAS worker before, she was great. But there hasn't been one for about six months, and I'm in a bad way. She was great. I could call her when I was on my own and she'd drop everything and come out. I'm really pissed off because I'm in a bad way and there's no one to help.*¹⁹

As well as funding, the availability of services was noted as an issue of great concern. When stakeholders were asked to list the top three issues they saw as affecting the ability of clients to access help to deal with family and domestic violence, the lack of services in rural areas, the availability of existing services and lengthy waiting times were frequently cited as inhibiting factors.

¹⁸ Consultation comment, service provider.

¹⁹ Consultation comment, victim of domestic violence.

Depending on the service, its role and location, this reported lack of access and availability could manifest itself as:

- the inability to provide a 24-hour service;
- no service, or the requirement that victims travel significant distances to access services; and
- long waiting times and/or infrequent service.

Operating hours

Concerns were expressed in some areas about the capacity of the refuge to provide a 24-hour service. Refuge workers outlined their security concerns for women attempting to access emergency support outside standard operating hours.

Distance

The impact of distance has particular relevance in rural areas in terms of service availability and access. Country areas have lower population levels spread across larger catchment areas, which means that services can be a significant distance from one another and are not present in smaller towns. Stakeholders spoke about the implications that distance, isolation and a lack of transport have for their clients' ability to access services.

While stakeholders acknowledged that rural population levels do not permit locally based services in every community, they expressed concern that the distance to services impairs their clients' ability to access them. In part, this is due to the reliance on private transport outside the metropolitan area, which is often not available to victims in crisis situations, or its use may be controlled and monitored by abusive partners. Further, where a service is not available or, in the case of refuges, already has a full complement of residents, clients can be re-directed to services located outside their community and often several hours away from their home. For those clients who would prefer to remain in their local area, relocation can be distressing, particularly where children are involved, and it can also reduce the ability of local refuge and outreach staff to maintain contact to provide support.

Distance is the defining characteristic of rural and remote areas. In a state the size of Western Australia, with the distribution of population so heavily concentrated in the Perth region, it is unlikely that the 'tyranny of distance' will be overcome completely. To address the access and availability issues outlined above, one option is increased promotion of web-based information and telephone help-lines.

The Western Australian Government's community development web site, www.community.wa.gov.au, provides information about the options for assistance available to people experiencing violence and about ways to help family and friends experiencing violence. It has links to the *Domestic Violence Online Resource Guide*, which can be searched to display services according to location or type. With increasing use of the internet and its availability at public libraries and tele-centres, this web-based information is an important resource.

The Women's Domestic Violence Helpline and the Men's Domestic Violence Helpline offer free, 24-hour telephone referral, support and counselling for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. In the consultation interviews, in response

to a question regarding which organisations a person would approach if seeking assistance for a family and domestic violence situation, stakeholders did not often mention the Online Guide or help-lines. This indicates that their visibility in rural areas could be improved.

Telephone help has also been provided by some refuges to police attending family and domestic violence situations. Refuge staff have counselled the victim over the phone about her wellbeing, accommodation and legal options while the police dealt with the perpetrator. There may be scope for the police to contact either the help-lines or, if appropriate, the local refuge more regularly in such situations, particularly when the victim remains in the home and the perpetrator is removed.

In non-crisis situations, other service providers, such as the Department for Community Development or the counselling organisations, could also direct clients to the help-lines (or provide access to them) when they are not able to provide immediate in-person assistance. This type of service collaboration and co-ordination could assist to provide the victim with crisis counselling and support without leaving the home or travelling long distances.

Another option raised by stakeholders to overcome the difficulties presented by distance and improve access to information and assistance was to increase the mobility of workers. A suggested model is the AgCare mode of service delivery, where counsellors visit families in their homes and provide a wide range of counselling assistance. Unlike a service that does some outreach work but is largely based in a regional centre, a dedicated mobile service would avoid the issues around the frequency of services (see below) by travelling to individual clients. A mobile service such as this could contribute to overcoming the barriers to accessing services faced by people in many isolated rural communities.

Waiting times

The consultations revealed significant stakeholder frustration regarding the waiting times for, and infrequency of, services in non-crisis situations, and the impact of delays on clients. Many service providers in the counselling field described waiting times of up to eight weeks for appointments with new clients. Similarly, workers in smaller towns expressed concern that mobile services, which operate from bases in regional centres, were available only one day per week or per fortnight in their town, which was not sufficient to meet demand and maintain a level of continuity with clients.

The ability to assist a client presenting in a non-crisis situation within a reasonable timeframe is important because people are often reluctant to seek help, and they can be discouraged from persisting if assistance is not readily available. Some stakeholders noted that this was particularly true for Aboriginal women, who tend to have a strong preference for 'dealing with it in the family'.

FACS [now the Department for Community Development] advised Mum that she needed to get assistance from her own immediate area ... She wanted to access assistance outside her immediate town to reduce the chance of locals seeing her enter the building and my stepfather "finding out". It took a LOT of effort to get my mum to ask for help to leave the relationship — she was very vulnerable and on the precipice of going "back to him" on an hourly basis. What I am saying is, that time lag of getting Mum to the "right" FACS centre was crucial — it took even more

*effort to convince her to try again. I wish that the counsellor could have assisted her regardless of where she had come from.*²⁰

*Women are often reluctant to come forward, and when they do, they need the services then and there, not give them an appointment time in eight weeks or for next Tuesday at nine AM. You need to strike while the iron is hot and help them then, because they'll be reluctant to come back, and you've lost that opportunity.*²¹

The ability to respond flexibly is important to reduce the chances of vulnerable clients being discouraged from seeking help by overly lengthy or bureaucratic processes. As such, strict adherence to district boundaries may at times be a barrier to victims who choose to seek help outside of their small community. As a result, it may be appropriate for services to assess individual circumstances and provide some flexibility.

A Co-ordinated Response

It is important that vulnerable clients are able to access support and assistance quickly when they present seeking help for family and domestic violence situations. When this is not possible, clients can be discouraged and an opportunity to assist in breaking the cycle of abuse can be lost.

The ability to 'strike while the iron is hot' and provide co-ordinated, comprehensive support was emphasised as particularly important in the 72 hours following crisis situations. In that period, victims' motivation to take action to address the abusive nature of their relationship is high. Stakeholders expressed frustration that, outside the 72-hour, emotionally charged crisis period, the likelihood of victims taking positive action decreases significantly. Doubts about the severity of the incident, hopes that 'it won't happen again' and fears of an uncertain future arise, reducing motivation to take up opportunities for support, counselling and alternative housing arrangements.

With the implementation of the amended Restraining Order legislation, the police now have the ability to remove a perpetrator for a minimum of 24 hours. Police are also pursuing a policy of encouraging the victim and children to stay in the familiar surroundings of the family home. When a victim goes to a refuge, crisis counselling and support are available in a secure environment; however, when a victim stays in the family home there is a risk that they may not have immediate access to such support services if the incident occurs outside the operating hours of local services. The co-ordination of policing, accommodation, counselling and support services and the appropriate sharing of information was identified as important. Co-ordination not only provides 'seamless' service delivery within the important 72-hour window, it also improves the safety and security of victims by making information pertaining to needs, risk and safety available to all workers.

Among the stakeholders interviewed, a good working relationship was identified between many of the refuges and police. However, given that co-ordination of services within the 72-hour timeframe and sharing information was frequently raised as an issue, there is scope to expand the current arrangements and reinforce their importance.

²⁰ Consultation comments, former child witness to family and domestic violence.

²¹ Consultation comments.

Existing RDVCs have played an important role in establishing local and regional plans and developing cooperative working arrangements to support clients. However, some stakeholders report that they have had little involvement in the RDVCs and that the management of some agencies was not supportive of staff participating in the committees. Also, several stakeholders made comments to the effect that: "Time commitments for people on the committee are a big issue, because they're already flat out in their regular jobs. If there's not a specific point in attending, it's hard to get busy people to attend."²² Workloads are an area for ongoing management attention, particularly if they inhibit the effective participation of staff in important service delivery co-ordination groups.

In 2005, the FDVU undertook an evaluation of the current RDVC model to assess its capacity to achieve improved outcomes for people experiencing family and domestic violence. The review has proposed significant changes to the existing model in order to strengthen its focus on women and children experiencing family and domestic violence, improve agency co-ordination and increase the representation of key family and domestic violence service providers.

Anonymity

Because everyone seems to know everyone, where I have grown up and who I have associated with, what people think of you is utmost ... everything you do and what you have, you are constantly aware of what others will say; that plays a big part.²³

It was commonly stated that in small towns, everyone knows everyone, and everyone knows everyone else's business. For service providers, this can be positive, as they know their colleagues in other agencies can contact them quickly and directly to establish a network of contacts around a case. Almost unanimously, stakeholders nominated that one of the strengths of working in a small community was the ability to network and easily link up with other services.

Unfortunately, for people experiencing family and domestic violence, the familiarity so helpful to workers is a very strong inhibiting factor preventing them from accessing information or assistance:

There is a pervasive perception of a lack of confidentiality in small communities, which may add to people's difficulties when they want to leave a violent relationship — fear of being found out or being seen accessing family and domestic violence services.²⁴

As was discussed in the section on community education above, in rural areas, community attitudes towards the issue of domestic violence are often hostile, sometimes to the point of denying its existence. Indeed, some stakeholders reported an alarming acceptance and normalisation of a certain level of violence in country areas, particularly in the Aboriginal community. In such an environment,

²² Consultation comment.

²³ Domestic violence victim, cited in Wendt, S and Cheers, B (2002), 'Impacts of Rural Culture on Domestic Violence', *Rural Social Work*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, June.

²⁴ Consultation comment.

vulnerable people are less likely to understand or acknowledge that abuse is a problem and less likely to feel able to seek help.

Beyond the pressures of social disapproval or being unaware that violence and control in a relationship is unacceptable, victims have a very real fear that 'word would get around' that they had been asking for information or had sought help, exposing them to repercussions when the perpetrator found out. As such, clearly labelling services as providing family and domestic violence assistance can prevent victims from accessing them. The overwhelming response from stakeholders was the need to "hide" family and domestic violence information and assistance services within other more neutral and socially sanctioned services. The AgCare model outlined above, where counsellors visit families in their homes, was nominated as an excellent option for distributing information and assistance in an acceptable way. Because AgCare provides counselling and assistance for a range of issues, including financial and relationship counselling and farming issues such as succession planning, there is a high level of respect in communities for the organisation. Because AgCare can advise on many subjects, the reason behind a visit from their staff is not obvious to neighbours or partners:

AgCare are worth their weight in gold. They go to houses for child care, financial care, all sorts of help, so that kind of model is good because DV services can be "hidden" with other acceptable services. AgCare is OK. Having a DVAS [domestic violence advocacy and support] worker come to your property would get around and that would definitely not be OK. DV has got to be fitted in with existing services that have anonymity and neutrality. It has to come to them because they can't always get out and about.²⁵

Several stakeholders also nominated community development shop-fronts as an option to overcome the inhibiting lack of anonymity in small towns. A shop-front that provided a range of social services and information, including parenting or child development information, gives victims and perpetrators the opportunity to seek assistance in an anonymous and legitimate setting. "One-stop shops" of this nature do exist in many small towns and could be utilised for this purpose. Consultation participants from the Department for Community Development considered their offices to operate in this way. Existing family and domestic violence services could consider being co-located.

An overlooked resource in providing anonymous assistance is the domestic violence help-lines. As noted above, the help-lines were not mentioned often as resources in the interviews, indicating that their visibility could be improved. It may also indicate that face-to-face counselling is seen as the primary model for assistance. The advantage the help-lines have in small communities is that they can be accessed anonymously and at a time that is safe and convenient.

Anonymity for Aboriginal women accessing assistance was also raised as a significant issue. Several stakeholders reported that there can often be kinship connections with Aboriginal domestic violence workers and other support staff, such as the Department for Community Development officers, or other residents at refuges. This can mean that women are reluctant to seek help because of concerns about confidentiality and causing a rift in families (family feuding). In addition to the comments of stakeholders, the issue of family feuding and family

²⁵ Consultation comment.

payback as a result of indiscretion was raised by Aboriginal women interviewed in the best-practice review of the Carnarvon refuge. Clients were concerned about workers who knew clients personally. While this may be unavoidable in very small communities, the women expressed a desire for staff to be alert to any possible conflict between clients when taking admissions.²⁶

Lack of anonymity was unanimously cited as a significant factor inhibiting people from accessing information and assistance for family and domestic violence situations. In a community where everyone knows everyone else, and where attitudes resist the acknowledgement of domestic violence, repercussions could include gossip, social isolation or family feuding. The reaction of a violent partner could compromise victims' safety. As such, stakeholders stressed the need for effective family and domestic violence information and support services in small communities to be located within neutral and accepted services. There is also scope for improving awareness of anonymous services like the help-lines, which can offer help in a way that is controlled by the person seeking assistance.

Outreach and Follow-Up Support

*The lack of services means that women will go back if there's no support for them. It's frightening to be on your own with little support, and so they often go back to the familiar.*²⁷

Research indicates that intensive support for women in the first six months after leaving an abusive relationship is crucial. The period after separation is a dangerous time for victims of abuse and their children, as they are at risk of escalated violence. In addition, other consequences of separation can include increased stress caused by the cost and significant time demands required by legal actions and responding to other relevant agencies, greater health risks arising from exposure to violence and abuse, and concern for their children.²⁸

For victims experiencing these stresses, outreach and transitional support is important to ensure that they are able to cope. Transitional services are those providing follow-up support once a woman has left a refuge, while outreach is usually described as those services providing as support and information services to women who have never been a resident of a refuge. These services include information and support, advocacy and meetings outside a woman's home. Support, including group work, can be also provided in conjunction with specialist workers such as interpreters, disability, mental health, and drug and alcohol workers.²⁹

Several interview participants reported anecdotal evidence that victims believe they cannot seek help if they return to the perpetrator or are unwilling to leave the relationship. It is important to note that while outreach services are characterised as support that is provided after separation or following a victim's residence at a refuge, domestic violence service workers were keen to point out that victims do

²⁶ Commonwealth Department for Family and Community Services (2003), *Best Practice for Early Intervention and Prevention of Domestic Violence in the Gascoyne Region*, [PUBLISHER], p. 11.

²⁷ Consultation comment.

²⁸ For example, see articles referred to at: www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/nl2004/wintermh.pdf and www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/Newsletter_12.pdf.

²⁹ Australian Domestic Violence Clearinghouse (2002), *Newsletter*, Issue 12, September, p. 9.

not have to be separated from their partner or wish to end the relationship or have used the refuge in order to be eligible for assistance.

Outreach work is a significant element in responses to abuse. In the consultations, stakeholders indicated that they felt unable to provide the level of outreach support required. A focus on the extension of outreach services could work to address the issue of inadequate funding levels identified previously. The misconceptions about approaching support workers for assistance outlined by some stakeholders are of concern. It is important that information is provided to clarify these misunderstandings and stress the availability of services to all victims seeking assistance.

Men's Services

In recent years, consideration of the policy development program in the field of family and domestic violence services has included the responses available to perpetrators of family and domestic violence. In the metropolitan area, the residential program 'Communicare's Breathing Space' provides intensive counselling and support, and the Department of Justice has funded a range of agencies in various locations to provide men's individual and group counselling for perpetrators in the justice system. There are also programs aimed at Aboriginal men's needs, such as the camps run by Wheatbelt Support Services. The camps are not specifically for perpetrators of violence but deal with a range of issues pertinent to Aboriginal men, including substance abuse, family violence, fatherhood and 'how to be a good bloke'.

The availability of men's services was a common issue raised by stakeholders in the interviews. Stakeholders expressed concern that there is a lack of counselling and accommodation services to assist men who perpetrate domestic violence. In large part, this concern is due to the impact of the amendments to the Restraining Order legislation, which give police powers to issue 'on-the-spot' Police Orders, allowing them to remove a perpetrator to protect the victim's safety in the home. In the past, the only option available to victims and children to escape violence was through accommodation at a secure refuge. Now that legislation provides more scope for the victim to stay in the home, the most frequent comment from stakeholders on this situation was: "Where are the men supposed to go?"

There are few emergency accommodation options for men displaced from their homes, which reflects the historical focus on removing women and children to a safe location. In cases where a Police Order is issued, common accommodation options for men are family and friends or hotels and motels. A Centrelink crisis payment is available to men in situations where a VRO or a Police Order has been issued, depending on individual circumstances. This payment could be made available soon after a perpetrator is removed from their residence.

Counselling services were also highlighted as an area requiring further attention. Several stakeholders commented that current services have a full complement of participants as a result of referrals through the court system, to the point that there is little room for men voluntarily registering to participate. While the levels of demand for such groups was not ascertained as part of this project, the Men's Domestic Violence Helpline is available 24 hours per day to support and counsel

men. As outlined above, few stakeholders interviewed mentioned the helpline, indicating the need to increase awareness of the service within the community.

A review relating to the legislation is planned to be undertaken within two years. In addition, a research and consultation project is underway within the FDVU to examine responses to men as victims or perpetrators of family and domestic violence. The project will assess existing services through consultation with practitioners and stakeholders. The needs of rural men and communities that have been identified through this consultation process will inform the men's services project.

Children's Services

*I can't bring my friends home any more in case Dad's in a bad mood.*³⁰

Until the amendments to the *Violence Restraining Order Act* were passed last year, children had not been considered to be victims of family and domestic violence unless they were the direct subject of the violence. Importantly, the amendments recognised the psychological effects of a child witnessing violence within a domestic relationship. An order can now be granted where the child has been exposed to domestic violence and is likely to be exposed again, or where there is risk that the child will be exposed to violence.

While the effects of family and domestic violence on children are increasingly recognised, stakeholders felt that children's issues need to be further addressed in service provision. The need for more children's counselling was expressed.

Housing

In the report of the Homelessness Taskforce, women and children escaping violence were highlighted as being vulnerable to homelessness. The definition of secondary homelessness, where people live in "stop-gap" accommodation, explicitly includes victims of violence:

*women and children escaping relationship and family violence, staying in women's refuges or alternative supported accommodation options; families residing in externally supported accommodation options; and people residing temporarily with other families, acquaintances and friends because they have no accommodation of their own.*³¹

Since the Homelessness Taskforce published its report, the *Violence Restraining Orders Act* has been amended. Legislative changes grant police the ability to remove the perpetrator of violence and leave the partner and children in the home. This has had ramifications for men's accommodation needs, which are discussed in the section on Men's Services above. However, it is not yet clear whether the temporary displacement of perpetrators is leading to longer-term requirements for accommodation.

³⁰ Child witness, Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, *Child Witness Info Sheet*. <http://www.dvirc.org.au/publications/ChildWitInfo.htm>.

³¹ Government of Western Australia, *The Government's Response to the Homelessness Report*. www.homeless.dhw.wa.gov.au/shtf_report2.pdf.

In the consultation interviews, comments by stakeholders regarding housing issues reinforced the observations made by the Homelessness Taskforce. Stakeholders outlined their concerns that victims of family and domestic violence in rural areas are returning to the family home and to the perpetrator because there are few alternative accommodation options available to them. Stakeholders expressed frustration, in particular, at the lack of public housing, the very long waiting lists, and the prohibitive cost of private rental housing. While domestic violence is grounds for women requiring accommodation to be placed on the priority public housing list, the wait can be lengthy.

For residents of mining towns, the issue of housing availability has an added complication. Housing is often assigned to an employee as part of their conditions of employment with the company. As such, the partner of an offending employee has little right to the housing provided by the employer, should the relationship break down. In addition, mining is currently experiencing a boom, which has reduced the availability of the already limited private rental housing available in these towns and increased rental costs.

However, many people relocate to mining towns for the employment opportunities; when a relationship breaks down due to violence, the victim often returns to the place where their family and support networks are established. While this reduces the urgency of housing needs in mining towns, the availability of alternative and affordable housing for victims, whether in a mining town or in Perth, remains an issue.

The lack of appropriate housing was cited as a factor in incidents of family and domestic violence within the Aboriginal community. For this group, stakeholders nominated overcrowding and its role in exacerbating household tensions as a significant consideration contributing to violence. It was also reported that Aboriginal people face discrimination when seeking private rental accommodation, which hinders their ability to find suitable housing.

An interesting factor affecting the availability of affordable housing has been the recent housing investment boom. In several of the towns visited, stakeholders described how investors have taken advantage of the relatively low cost of property outside the metropolitan area and away from the very high prices in cities in the eastern States. Stakeholders conceded that in some cases this has led to a higher standard of housing as investors renovated and maintained houses that had previously been left without maintenance for long periods. However, with higher standards, rents have increased, and many of their clients are unable to afford them.

Beyond the actual availability of housing, accessing accommodation can be very difficult for people experiencing violence, due to past bad debts or damaged properties. Stakeholders reported their concern that, in some cases, a victim can be left with a bad tenant rating due to damage caused or debts incurred by the perpetrator of abuse.

The Department for Housing and Works' public housing agency, Homeswest, has systems in place to assist tenants with their rent and maintenance responsibilities

and to prevent debt and evictions relating to anti-social behaviour. The Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP) is a voluntary program that aims to:

assist Homeswest tenants who are at risk of eviction to avoid becoming homeless. SHAP workers visit tenants in their homes on a regular basis to discuss issues and options and to provide assistance with managing budgets and developing 'homemaker' skills. SHAP is holistic in the sense that it works on a wide range of issues which impinge on the ability of the tenant to maintain his or her housing. Some common issues include: housekeeping skills, budgeting, domestic violence, child abuse, drug and alcohol problems and mental illness.³²

In addition, Homeswest's Family and Domestic Violence Policy outlines the assistance to which victims of violence are entitled. As noted above, applicants whose reason for applying for housing is due to violence are regarded as priority cases. Also, contrary to regulations for other applicants, ownership or co-ownership of property will not prevent an application for public housing where domestic violence is present. Where an applicant is in a joint tenancy with the perpetrator, Homeswest will consider the tenant who has daily care of the children as the legal tenant.

Importantly, clause 12 of the policy states that the tenant may not be held liable for the cost of repairs to a property due to wilful damage, provided that the damage is reported to police. In recognition of the fact that many victims do not report abuse or damage inflicted by their partners, the policy provides for support agencies to advise of damage on behalf of a client and states that "discretion may be exercised in the determination of tenant liability where domestic violence is involved and the matter not reported to the police".

At the broadest level, addressing the availability of affordable housing is a multifaceted problem involving both State and federal governments through their responsibility to provide public housing and to negotiate funding levels for the joint Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement. In this context, it is important to provide relevant State and federal government agencies with current information and advice on issues of access to safe and appropriate housing for victims of family and domestic violence.

At a more immediate level, there is much scope to include housing within a co-ordinated family and domestic violence response. One aspect of the response could be to improve the communication of Homeswest's Family and Domestic Violence Policy guidelines to refuge staff and social workers, counsellors and clients of both Homeswest and the Department for Community Development. The fact that many stakeholders expressed concern that victims can be unfairly burdened with damage debts, even though Homeswest does make provision for this and other family and domestic violence situations, indicates that the agency's policies may not be well understood. Ongoing representation of Homeswest on RDVCs could improve this aspect of service provision.

³² Shelter WA, *Supported Housing Assistance Program Info Sheet*.
www.shelterwa.org.au/publications/regularpubs/infosheets/infosheet25.pdf.

Conclusion

Many of the issues for victims and perpetrators seeking assistance for family and domestic violence are similar across metropolitan and regional Western Australian locations. Funding and service levels are ongoing issues, as is access to alternative accommodation and promoting understandings of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

However, in non-metropolitan areas, many of the issues listed above are exacerbated. Due to the large catchment areas of regional districts and the distance between services, non-metropolitan service providers face higher operating costs. These funding constraints further limit the services that can be provided, which, in turn, affects the ability of clients to access services in a timely manner. Accommodation is expensive and in short supply in regional areas, making the process of finding alternative housing difficult for both victims and perpetrators of violence.

Additional issues affect service provision in regional areas. The lack of anonymity experienced in small communities deters victims from utilising services that are clearly identified with family and domestic violence. Conservative community attitudes towards gender roles and family and domestic violence can impair the ability of victims to recognise the abusive nature of a relationship and to seek help without suffering social repercussions.

To effectively meet the needs of people experiencing violence in regional Western Australia, policy and service responses must consider and work to address the particular factors affecting people resident in these areas. In considering future responses to family and domestic violence in rural and regional areas, it is important to support the dedicated staff and sustain effective services. Positive outcomes can be achieved for country-based victims of abuse where relevant and timely assistance is available.

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Appendix 1

Consultation Interview Questions

1) What is your role or interest in DV?

2) What do you think are the differences between DV responses in the city, a regional centre and a country town?

Distance/ isolation		Anonymity (lack)	
Prevalence of firearms		Community attitudes	
Availability of services		Availability of alternative housing	

Other/ comment:

What are the positives or strengths about living in a small town (in relation to DV)?

3) Right now, if a woman sought help to deal with or leave a violent relationship, who would she go to or where would she go in your area?

DV helpline		Church/ religious organisation	
GP		Refuge	
Women's health centre		Other family members	

Other/ comment:

4) How would the local community react to a disclosure of violence? (Would she be supported or would she be ostracised? Would anyone notice?)

5) In what ways has the situation improved over time in terms of women being more willing to seek help to deal with or leave a violent relationship? If not, why not?

6) Do Aboriginal women and women from non-English speaking backgrounds access domestic violence services in your area? If not, why not?

8) What do you see as the three key issues hindering women accessing domestic violence services in rural and regional areas?

Lack of services		Lack of refuges	
Distance/ Isolation		Awareness of services	
Understanding that what they are experiencing is domestic violence.		Community attitudes/ ostracised	
Not financially independent		Lack of alternative housing	
Culturally sensitive		Anonymity/ confidentiality	
Attachment to the home/ land			

Other/ comment:

9) How could the regional domestic violence committee help improve local responses to DV?

10) What do you see as the three key issues for DV service provision in rural and regional areas?

Lack of prevention/ education services		Lack of victim counselling	
Distance/ isolation		Lack of alternative housing	
Lack of refuges		Community attitudes	
Attracting/ retaining staff		Awareness of services	
Police responses		Funding (amount & application process)	
Co-ordinated service delivery		Lack of perpetrator programs	

Other/ Comments:

11) Apart from funding new or expanded services, what other options could be used to prevent or respond to domestic violence?

12) Could you recommend any other service providers or community groups in your area that I should speak to?

Appendix 2

Agencies Consulted

Department for Community Development
Country Women's Association
Women's Council for Domestic and Family Violence Services
Kimberley Regional Domestic Violence Council
Newman Women's Shelter
Anglicare (WA)
Waratah Domestic Violence Counselling Service
Albany Family Violence Service
Warren Blackwood Emergency Accommodation Centre
South West Aboriginal Medical Service
Narrogin Regional Domestic Violence Action Group
South West Regional Domestic Violence Committee
Great Southern Family Violence Intervention Council
Western Australian Police Service
Chrysalis Support Services
Wheatbelt Regional Family and Domestic Violence Committee
Wheatbelt Support Services
Domestic Violence Legal Unit, Legal Aid
Peel Regional Domestic Violence Committee
Katanning Regional Emergency Accommodation Centre
Mates Men's Support Group